

A Strategic Framework for Messaging in the American Community Survey Mail Materials

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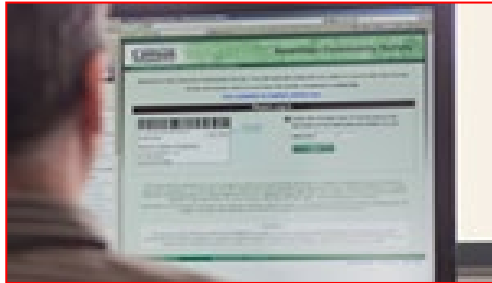
AAPOR 77th Annual Conference
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The views expressed are those of the author and not
those of the U.S. Census Bureau.

American Community Survey

Data collection process

Online



Mail



Personal Visit

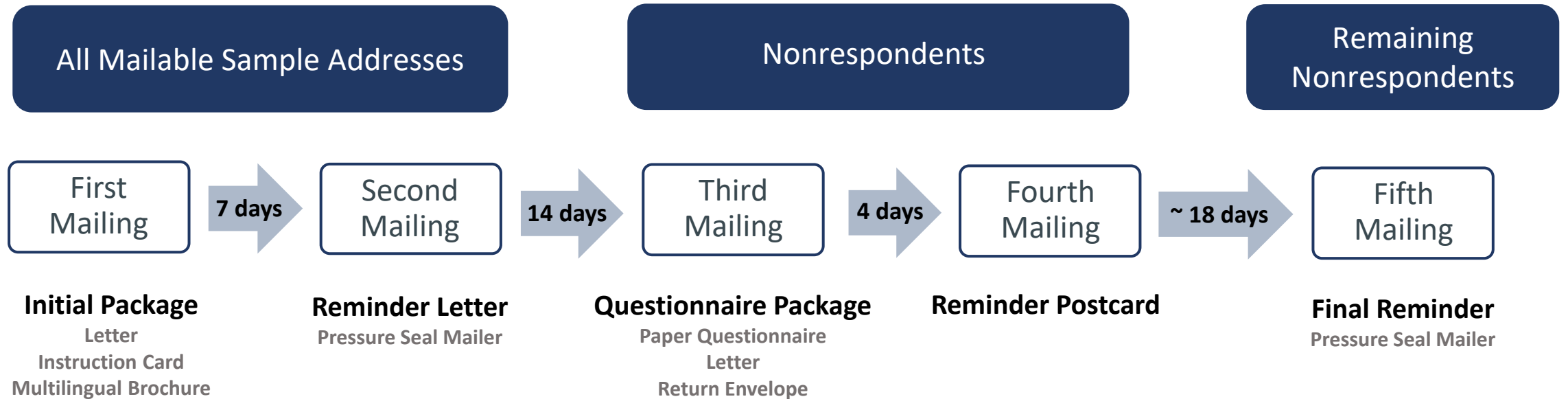


Self-Response Phase
Six Weeks

Nonresponse Follow-Up Phase
Four Weeks

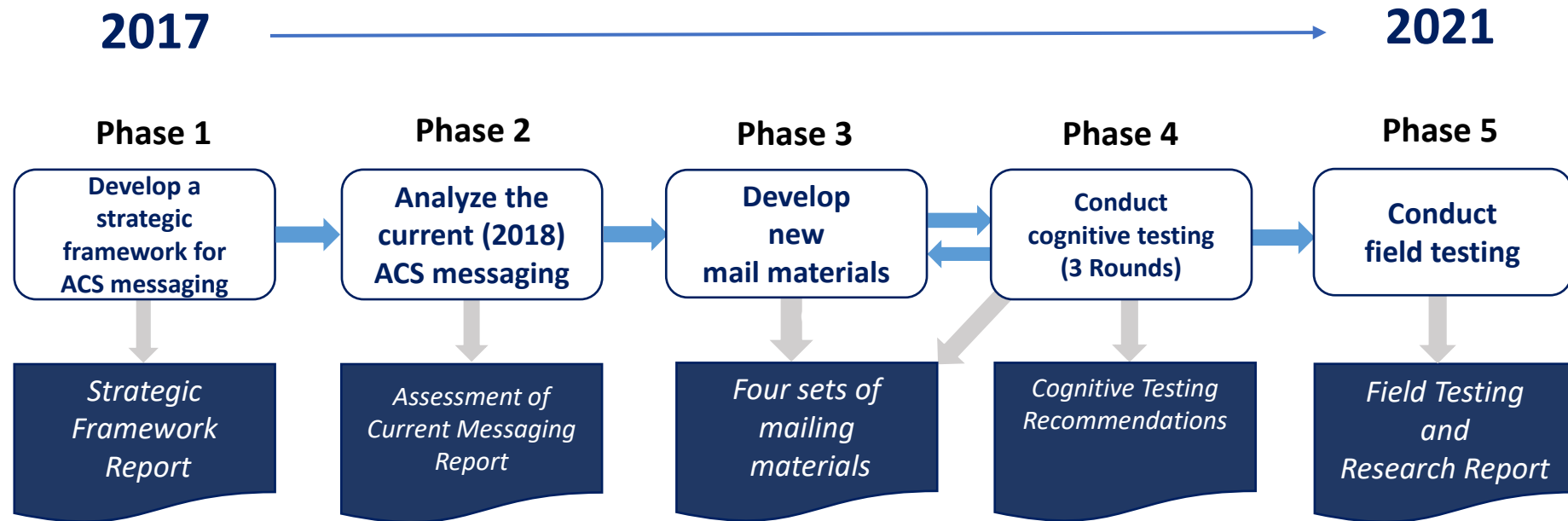
2022 ACS Self-Response Contact Strategy

Mail contact materials



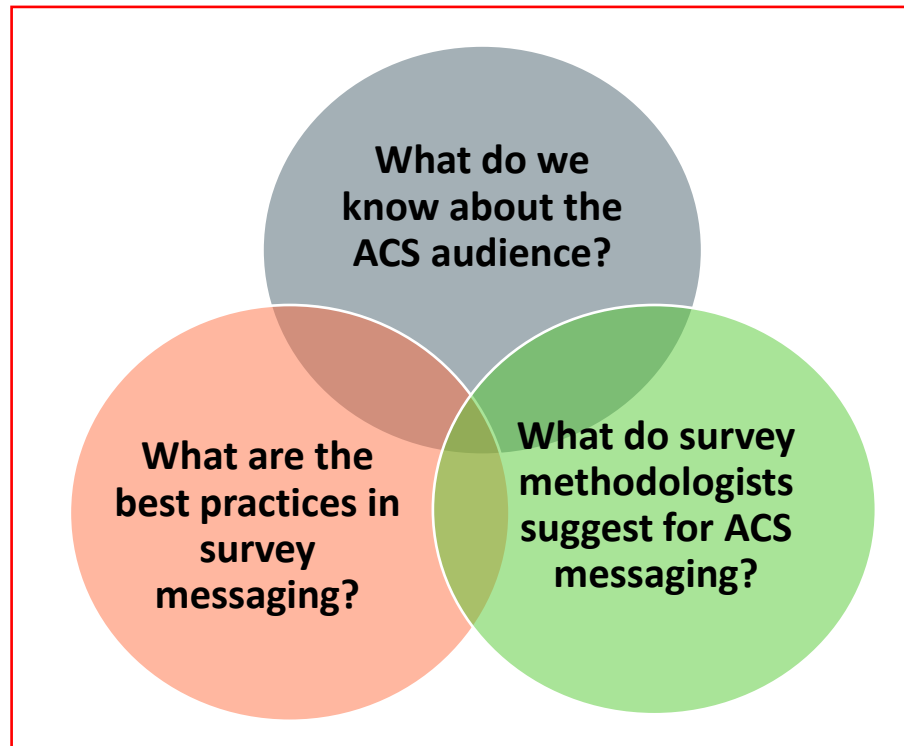
Strategic Framework Project

Long-term plan to improve the mail materials holistically



Phase 1

Develop a strategic framework for ACS messaging



Phase 1

What do we know about the ACS audience?

Decennial census audience studies

- Segmentation and Mindset Study (2007)
- Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Surveys I (2008)
- Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Surveys II (2010)

Mindset and motivation studies related to the decennial census

ACS audience studies

- Collaborative research with Reingold, Inc. (2013-2014)
- Collaborative research with Gallup (2014)

Mindset and motivation studies related to the American Community Survey

Phase 1

What do we know about the ACS audience?

- There is a lack of awareness of the ACS among the general public.
- The ACS audience is composed of people who:
 - trust the government
 - distrust the government
 - are generally unaware of the role of government
- Messages about the confidentiality of the ACS data do not have high believability among the distrustful segment of the population.
- Messages that convey community-level benefits of ACS participation are viewed favorably.

Phase 1

What do survey methodologists suggest for ACS messaging?

Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST, 2015) suggested a focus on these themes:

- Social norms
- Personalization
- Procedural justice
- Preventing confusion
- Benefits of the survey

National Academy of Sciences Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT, 2016) recommendations:

- Attach the ACS to the Census brand
- Communicate the benefits of the ACS to the recipient's community
- Avoid repetitive, unfocused messaging

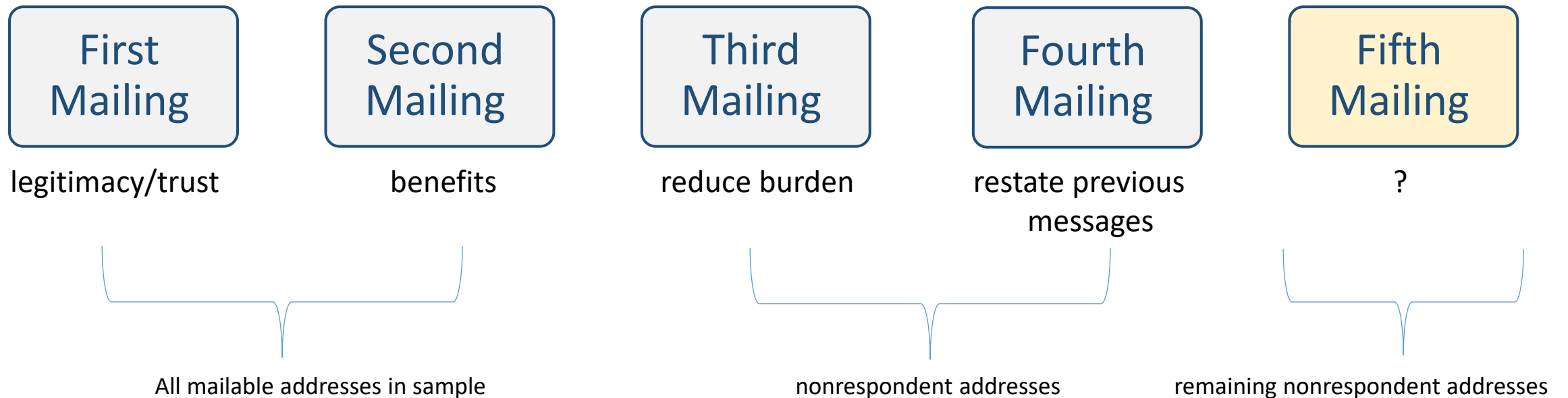
Phase 1

What are the best practices in survey messaging?

- Establish legitimacy and trust early.
- Communicate in plain language.
- Reduce the number of messages per mailing.
- Communicate in a manner that conveys a continuous conversation over multiple mailings.
- Communicate different reasons to participate in the survey in each mailing.
- Convey the benefits of survey participation.

Phase 1

Recommend strategic framework for ACS messaging



Phase 2

Analyze the current (2018) ACS messaging

- Developed a codebook to classify all messages, text, and logos, in the 2018 materials.
 - The codebook consisted of four main messaging categories: *trust*, *benefits*, *burden reduction*, and *other*.
 - These four categories have subcategories (e.g., under **trust**, “establish credibility,” “confidentiality”).
- Coded all messages, text, and logos.
- Computed a variety of statistics pertaining to the coded data.
- Assessed the readability of the 2018 ACS mail contact materials.
- Made recommendations for developing a new set of ACS mail materials from the ground up.

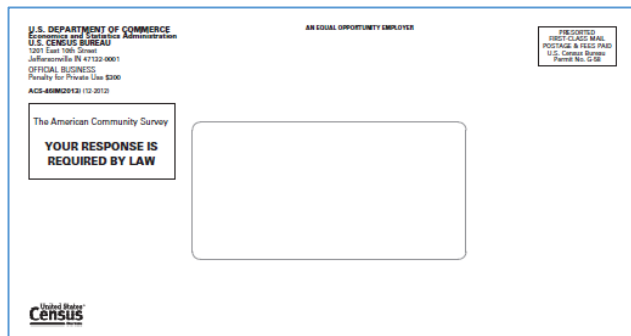
Phase 2

Analyze the current (2018) ACS messaging — Recommendations —

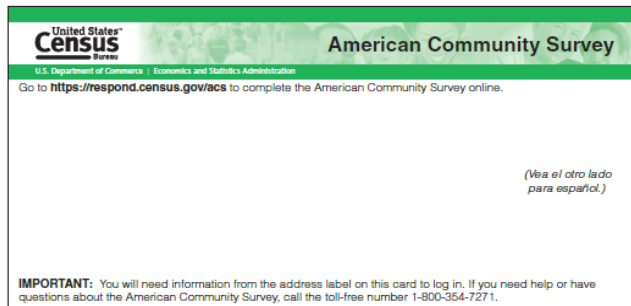
1. Reduce the number of messages per mailing.
2. Reduce repetitious messaging.
3. Use new appeals.
4. Use messages that are justified by research.
5. Improve the readability of the materials.

Phase 2

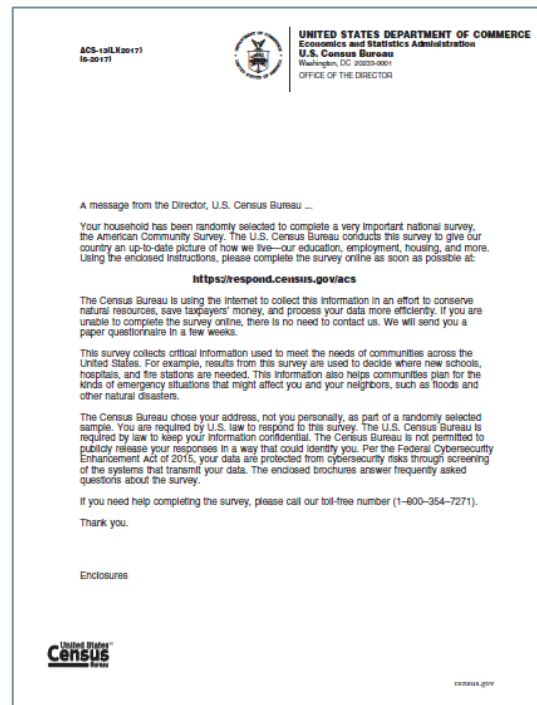
Analyze the current (2018) ACS messaging — Example of volume of messaging in mailing 1—



Outgoing Envelope



Instruction Card



Introduction Letter



FAQ Brochure



Multilingual Brochure

Phase 2

Analyze the current (2018) ACS messaging — Example of analysis: Letter in mailing 1—

Is it necessary to place the form number here?

ACS-13(LK2017)
16-20177



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
Economics and Statistics Administration
U.S. Census Bureau
Washington, DC 20233-0001
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

Four sponsors shown. The most important sponsor is presented third in the list.

Most Americans are not familiar with the Department of Commerce. They are however familiar with the U.S. Census Bureau. Where's the Census logo?

A message from the Director, U.S. Census Bureau ...

Impersonal salutation

Your household has been randomly selected to complete a very important national survey, the American Community Survey. The U.S. Census Bureau conducts this survey to give our country an up-to-date picture of how we live—our education, employment, housing, and more. Using the enclosed instructions, please complete the survey online as soon as possible at:

<https://respond.census.gov/acs>

The 10-digit ID required to access the survey is listed on the instruction card, a separate mail piece

The Census Bureau is using the Internet to collect this information in an effort to conserve natural resources, save taxpayers' money, and process your data more efficiently. If you are unable to complete the survey online, there is no need to contact us. We will send you a paper questionnaire in a few weeks.

This survey collects critical information used to meet the needs of communities across the United States. For example, results from this survey are used to decide where new schools, hospitals, and fire stations are needed. This information also helps communities plan for the kinds of emergency situations that might affect you and your neighbors, such as floods and other natural disasters.

The Census Bureau chose your address, not you personally, as part of a randomly selected sample. You are required by U.S. law to respond to this survey. The U.S. Census Bureau is required by law to keep your information confidential. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data. The enclosed brochures answer frequently asked questions about the survey.

If you need help completing the survey, please call our toll-free number (1-800-354-7271).

Thank you.

Enclosures

1. Text dense
2. Lacks organization
3. Fairly difficult to read (10-12th grade level, Flesch Reading Ease score)
4. Too many messages:
 - a) conserving resources
 - b) saving taxpayers' money
 - c) benefits of survey participation
 - d) selected randomly for the survey
 - e) required by law to participate
 - f) confidentiality statements
 - g) cybersecurity act
 - h) brochures enclosed
 - i) contact information for more help

Unnecessary. Could place the director's signature here

The Census Bureau logo placement is not optimal



census.gov

Need a direct link to the ACS (i.e., census.gov/acs)

Phases 3 and 4

Develop new ACS mail materials

Conduct cognitive testing

- Four new sets of ACS mail contact materials were developed from the ground up (4 treatments).
 - Icon
 - Column and header
 - Sidebar
 - Minimalist
- The overarching strategy was to establish credibility, earn trust, reduce text, use strategic messaging, and use consistent design.
- The materials were written using plain language principles.
- The developed materials underwent three rounds of cognitive testing.

Phases 3 and 4

— Column and header introduction Letter (front)—


The Department of Commerce and Census Bureau logos establish survey credibility. The form number has been relocated to the bottom of the page.

Salutation speaks directly to the ACS recipient.

Your community benefits from your participation.

Correspondence from a real person who can be verified increases trust.

Form number relocated here.

 **United States[®] Census Bureau**

U.S. Census Bureau
American Community Survey Office
Washington, DC 20000

Dear Resident:

Your household has been selected to participate in the **American Community Survey**. Every year, the U.S. Census Bureau contacts households across the country to participate in this important, mandatory survey. Follow the two steps below to respond online with your computer, smartphone, or tablet.

1) Go to **respond.census.gov/acs**
2) Log in with your 10-digit user ID found on the enclosed card.


ABOUT THE SURVEY Your response to the American Community Survey helps your community plan for projects such as new schools, health clinics, and playgrounds as well as services for the elderly and veterans.

DO I HAVE TO RESPOND? Yes. This survey is so important to your community and the nation that **your response is required by law** (Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141, 193, and 221).

NEED A PAPER FORM? If you are unable to respond online, we will send you a paper questionnaire in about three weeks.

If you need help filling out the survey or have any questions, please call us at 1-800-354-7271. We are available to answer any questions or concerns you have.

Thank you for helping your community.

Sincerely,

Donna Daily
Chief, American Community Survey Office

ACS-135-XSF-CH (04-21-2021) census.gov/acs

Address header simplified to display the Census Bureau first followed by the American Community Survey Office.

Initial paragraph is to the point. The survey name is bolded. The survey is connected to the Census Bureau, a known entity.

Two-steps for logging into the survey. The URL has been simplified. The callout box draws the eye.

FAQs are presented in column and header format to facilitate navigation and readability.

We are available to help you.

Sponsor information to establish credibility and earn trust.

Phases 3 and 4

— Column and header introduction letter (back)—

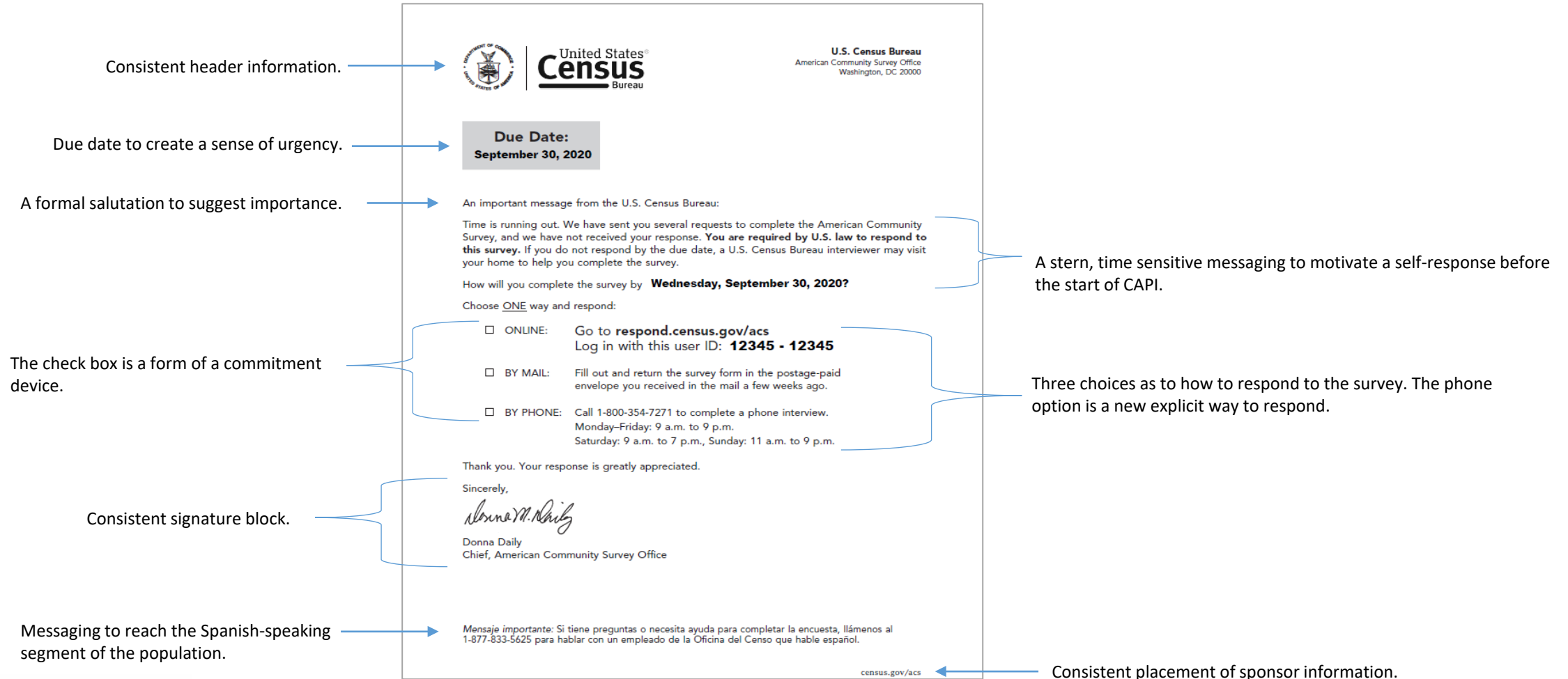
Additional information about the American Community Survey	
Is this a legitimate survey?	Yes. The U.S. Census Bureau has been conducting this survey since 2005. Only government agencies can use an internet address with the ".gov" extension. You can verify that this is an official government survey by calling 1-800-354-7271 (Mon-Fri: 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., Sat: 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., Sun: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.) or by visiting us at census.gov/acs .
Why was I selected?	Your address was selected through scientific sampling and represents thousands of other households like yours. The Census Bureau randomly selects about 3.5 million addresses throughout the country each year to respond to this survey.
Am I required to fill out the survey?	Yes. Your response to this survey is required by law (Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141, 193, and 221). Title 13, as changed by Title 18, imposes a penalty for not responding. To create an accurate picture of your community, it is critical that you respond.
Will my response be kept confidential?	Yes. The Census Bureau is required by law to protect this information. The Census Bureau is not permitted to publicly release your responses in a way that could identify you. We are conducting this survey under the authority of Title 13, U.S. Code, Sections 141 and 193. Federal law protects your privacy and keeps your answers confidential (Title 13, U.S. Code, Section 9). Per the Federal Cybersecurity Enhancement Act of 2015, your data are protected from cybersecurity risks through screening of the systems that transmit your data.
How will the Census Bureau use the information I provide?	By law, the Census Bureau can only use your responses to produce statistics. Your information will be used in combination with information from other households to produce data for your community. Similar data will be produced for communities across the United States and Puerto Rico. We may combine your answers with information that you gave to other agencies to enhance the statistical uses of these data. This information will be given the same protections as your survey information. Based on the information that you provide, you may be asked to participate in other Census Bureau surveys that are voluntary.

← The back of the letter is where we placed required information that would normally go on the front and obscure the most salient messages.

Consistent column and header format to ease navigation and enhance readability.

Phases 3 and 4

— Newly developed fifth mailing—



Phase 5

Conduct field testing

- In 2021, we conducted a field test of four new sets of ACS mail contact materials (4 treatments):
 - Icon
 - Column and Header
 - Sidebar
 - Minimalist
- The objective was to determine if the new sets of ACS mail materials would increase self-response over the production materials.
- The results of this controlled experiment will be presented next.

Questions?

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